

Comfortable Lions seek trip to state

Written by Jim Ecker

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Jaime Brandt, Amanda Ollinger and the Linn-Mar Lions are a lot more comfortable in their roles on the girls basketball team this season after a year of getting to know each other.

They hope it translates into a successful season and a trip to the Class 5A state tournament in Des Moines.

Brandt became the head coach at her alma mater last year when she was just 24 years old following an outstanding career at the University of Iowa and one year as an assistant coach at Linn-Mar. The Lions got off to a good start in November and December, but everyone was thrown an unexpected curve when Ollinger transferred from Cedar Rapids Jefferson to Linn-Mar and began playing for the Lions in January.

Ollinger is one of the top players in the state and a future Hawkeye, but the Lions hit a few bumps in January with a six-game losing streak before clicking again in February.

"It was kind of a difficult situation for everyone, just because no matter who you throw into the mix it took a while to get used to it," Brandt said Thursday. "So it was kind of hard last year, but having her around for half the year and the whole summer and preseason our chemistry is really good right now.

"The girls seem to really get along," said Brandt. "It's been fun so far."

Linn-Mar finished with a 16-8 record last season and fell one game short of reaching the state tournament, losing at Southeast Polk in the regional finals. The Lions were ranked No. 10 in the IGHSAU preseason poll Thursday

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and have their sights set on making the state meet this season.

"That's definitely our goal," Brandt said. "Ever since we got beat last year at Southeast Polk, we've kind of had our eyes on getting to Des Moines this year."

"I definitely think we have the talent. That's kind of our ultimate goal. The girls are working hard to get there, so we're excited about that. I think everyone is playing really well together."

Ollinger, a 6-foot-1 senior, has scored 898 points and grabbed 507 rebounds the last three years at Jefferson and Linn-Mar. She's the biggest name at Linn-Mar, but Brandt feels she has a deep and talented club with Kamryn Finley, Megan Murphy, Lexi Frese, Brittney Lancial, Claire Larson and other talented players in important roles.

"We have a lot of talent and a lot of girls to choose from," Brandt said. "I think we'll be more balanced than people think we are."

"Obviously Amanda is a tremendous player, but our top five or six are scorers. We have shooters and I think we have some different options."

Finley and Murphy played well last year as freshmen, with Finley at 8.2 points and Murphy at 4.6 points. Brandt thinks they are both ready for a big step forward as 10th graders.

"They both have improved tremendously from last year," she said. "Kamryn already has a couple of Division I offers (from Drake and UNI), which is awesome as a sophomore. She had a really good summer AAU-wise and she looks a lot more confident out there and stronger. You can tell that first year really helped her grow up."

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"Megan is looking really good, too. She worked really hard this summer and she's one of the best shooters I've seen, so we're excited to have both of them back."

Brandt plans to use Ollinger in a variety of ways this season.

"She's just so good because she can do so many different things," the coach said. "She's like a 6-1 or 6-2 guard. She definitely has the perimeter skills. She can shoot it, she can handle the ball, but if you put a guard on her, she can go inside and post up."

"I think the thing that makes her so special is how hard she is to guard."

Brandt, now 25, is looking forward to her second year as head coach after jumping into the fray last season as a rookie.

"I think I'm a lot more comfortable," she acknowledged. "I think I'm a little better at knowing when to put things in this year. Last year, I didn't know when to put things in and know what to expect."

Brandt likes the way the team is shaping up and how the girls are responding to her as head coach.

"We have a really good relationship," she said. "We can have a lot of fun at practice but also get a lot done at the same time."

Brandt is just a few weeks away from finishing her master's degree to become a classroom teacher. She'll become a student-teacher at the Linn

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Grove

Elementary school in the Linn-Mar district in January and is looking forward to a career in elementary education and coaching.